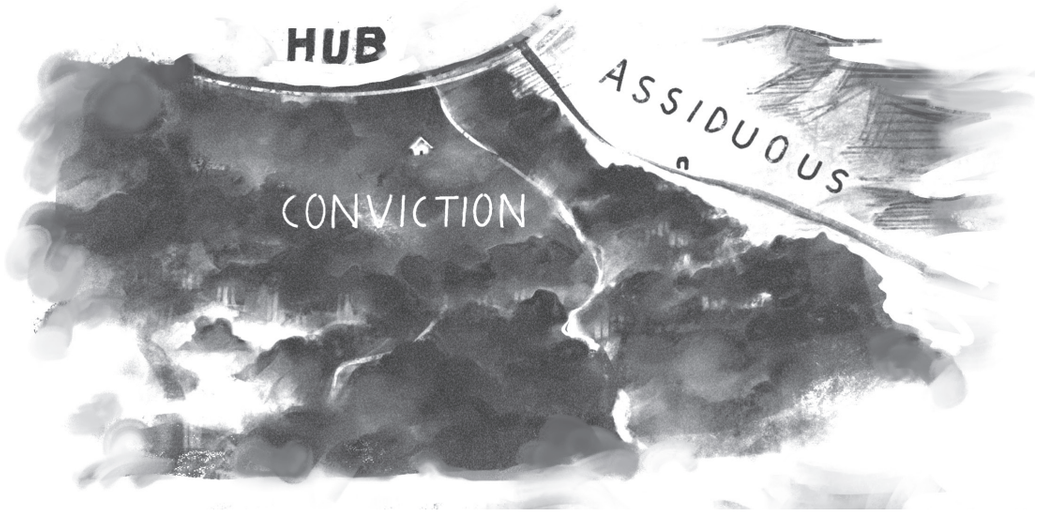
Chapter 1

Since the foundation of Gardian, Conviction Woods was believed to be uninhabitable—yet, within its reach withered the ghosts of the last war and their rain-hushed cries. Evidence of human presence dwelled in the depths of the forest, where spears and shields rusted amongst flourishing sword ferns. When wolves howled with wartime grief, the trees whispered a silent truth: Conviction Woods wasn't always cursed, for if it had been, the spirits of its soldiers would not live beneath mangled roots grown from old blood.

I lingered at the woodland's northwest edge, trees lining the dirt road that divided Conviction and Assiduous' territory. Before me, a faint shimmering wall of gold, green, and silver light flickered and swirled between the trunks that marked the boundary of the woods. Enchanted paper lanterns, their flames undying, were draped over branches. They warned outsiders of the danger within, in case the long list of obituaries hadn't already scared them away.



The tales of Conviction Woods were tales of death, told only by the survivors who could not look away when the forest seized their companions. Stories said that the forest would hum through needles and bark, whistles weaving between branches to warn of the wolf pack that lived within. When grief fell heavy upon a teller's words, they'd wave their hands and arms to represent the plumes of black smoke that transformed wolf into beast. The monster devoured its prey in the metaphysical realm before devouring them in the physical realm, baring teeth that could rend soul from flesh, flesh from bone. Conviction Woods made no exceptions for its carnage or curse.

But I knew that wasn't true, for the wolves had taken me into their pack.

My thoughts drifted to what lay beyond the forest's boundary, soon interrupted by a wet nose pressed against my black

shirt. Needles of sharp teeth poked through fabric. Although I appreciated the kind sentiment behind the affectionate nibbles, I gently brushed the wolf's snout away. I didn't want a collection of teeth marks on my side later. The wolf slipped under my crimson cloak and curled around my legs, peering up at me. I met its gaze, then looked back to the border of lanterns. The wolf's ears swiveled and perked at the sight of the snowy traveler's road, a stark contrast from the forest we lived in.

I took a step closer to the path, and the wolf followed, eyes darting between me and the protective aura. As I passed through the shimmering light, the wolf crouched down, flattening its ears as it let out a small whine. I'd seen the wolves yearn for the outside world a few times, but they'd never follow me out. After years of searching for an answer, I still had no idea why I could survive inside of the boundary, able to traverse the magical shield as I wanted, while the wolves refused to leave despite their longing. Maybe they couldn't. It was strange how much they yearned for the open fields that stretched toward the distant shape of the Nix Mountains on the horizon.

I always felt bad when I had to leave them behind, but I couldn't contain my excitement from the discovery I'd made. On the other side of the road stood a dilapidated arch, surrounded by fallen stones scattered upon the ground. I'd spent months scouring historical records to track down the arch described in a three hundred-year-old text recounting the skirmish closest to Conviction

Woods. Alongside a soldier's detailed description of the battle, blurred tracings of the arch's runic documented the death site of a troop leader.

I hurried across the path to inspect the arch, slowing when I neared the fragile structure. Boulders at each base supported the weight of the cracking rocks. Runic etchings were carved into each stone of the arch, a language weathered from centuries of wind and rain.

I set my rucksack onto the snow-dusted ground and retrieved my tracing materials. With hands stiff from the frigid air, I carefully placed a sheet of paper against one of the lowest stones, sweeping a stick of charcoal over the etching. Black dust smeared across my fingers and clung to my face as I blew away the excess, revealing what I'd traced. The strokes of the runic combined sharp corners and round lines, an alphabet I'd only seen documented post-war.

I reached into my bag until I found my notebook. I flipped it open, then placed the fresh charcoal tracing next to the pages where I'd copied the source document's runic. The writing didn't match. The text on the arch before me was written in a disjointed, modernized rendition of ancient Driksaal, while the historical record was written in accurate ancient Driksaal.

It wasn't the same arch. The original arch must've been elsewhere in the woods. Someone built a secondary arch, someone who had known where the original battle took place. The history of Conviction Woods was rewritten to conceal the knowledge that the

fact wasn't always cursed.

I grabbed more pages from my bag and continued tracing the inscriptions with renewed focus, working my way up the arch's side until I struggled to reach the upper stones. Huffing in frustration, I turned my attention to my charcoal tracings, stacking each one between blank pages. My discovery would be safe and sound, protected within my notebook at the bottom of my carefully packed bag. I turned my attention back to the boulders blocking my view of the lower stones. With bare hands, I tried to pull one of them away. I winced at the piercing cold sensation against my skin. My fingers slipped, the rough surface of the rock scraping my palm as I failed to budge the icy stone.

There was no way I could move the boulders. Whatever truth lay beneath them was lost to me. I stepped back with a sigh, cursing underneath my breath as I considered the etchings. Thoughts racing, I skimmed over an old language I hadn't yet found a translation guide for.

A panicked bark echoed behind me. I flinched, my concentration broken, and I spun around to face the woods.

One of the boundary lanterns rattled before crashing to the ground. Every muscle in my body tensed at the sight of the wolf leaping through the aura of protection. It yelped as it tumbled from its rapid escape, scrambling to its feet. With a tucked tail, it hurtled down the road, running faster than I'd ever seen. Its head twisted back, watching its flank and ensuring it wasn't being followed.

In the eighteen years I'd lived in Conviction Woods, I'd never seen a wolf afraid.

I'd walked close to ten miles from home to find the arch, and the only way back was through the woods. When a wolf had just run from something. What could be terrifying enough for a wolf to ignore its wariness and exit the forest?

Slowly, I reached for my rucksack, fastening it over my shoulders as my eyes caught on the brush where the wolf had fled. Before I could even think about walking up the trail, a flash of black and red appeared on the road near where the wolf had disappeared. My eyes narrowed.

A bolt of panic rushed through me. A Scorpio patrol. Of course. Why *wouldn't* a patrol be around for the first time I'd seen a wolf run from the woods? I was exactly who they were looking for—a disobedient "follower" that they'd harass into admitting I had wandered too far from Stellarium surveillance. They'd berate me, telling me how I needed to serve them better.

I would rather face whatever was in the forest than face the wrath of the regime. I did *not* want to deal with extra interrogation. I could already hear their condescending voices, the incessant questions about what I was doing this far from the Hub, why I wasn't doing something more useful. I swallowed my nervousness, hurrying across the road and pausing just before I entered the woods. The border patrol had picked up their pace. They'd definitely seen me.

I couldn't risk showing up at home with more bruises. Avia would freak. Without another moment of hesitation, I passed beyond the lanterns.

As soon as I entered the woods, I was struck by a wave of humid warmth. The transition from the snowy fields to the temperate climate of an enchanted rainforest was jarring, and my head spun from the shock. Sliding down the hill, my heels dragged against beds of moss. The surroundings wavered as I was overtaken by a dizzy spell. Pushing my back against the nearest tree trunk, I sat still, resting for a moment.

Conviction Woods had always been a safe haven for me—at least from the threats outside of it. I slowly exhaled to let my nervous system relax, closing my eyes to better focus on the sensory details of the forest. The squishy earth beneath my feet cushioned my footsteps with shed cones from the hemlocks. Moisture-laden air filled my lungs, smelling of petrichor and damp soil. A prickly sensation tingled across my bare arms, a reminder of the aggressive temperature change.

I searched for the sounds that normally soothed me when I was anxious. They were all absent—the birdsong, the soft footsteps of a wolf or two trotting alongside me, the gentle rustling of pine needles against a breeze. The forest was completely silent.

I jumped to my feet, Scanning my surroundings to check for any signs of life. The typical woodland creatures had vanished, not a soul in sight. My mouth went dry, a chill creeping down my spine.

It was as if the forest itself was hiding from something. For the first time, I felt truly alone in the woods.

I had to keep moving. My family would be concerned if I didn't return by nightfall. Red paint smears across tree trunks guided me home—paint I'd made from some rusted metal weapons that I'd found scattered throughout the woods. Each of my steps were cautious, as if any wrong movement would be my last. On a trail so overgrown, it was nearly impossible to avoid snapping twigs and rustling bushes. Fog cloaked the path before me, sandwiched between tall ferns and densely packed trees. I could barely see more than five steps ahead.

I hated it, hated *everything* about it. The woods had never felt like this before. I'd taken my curious wolf companions for granted; the further I ventured, the less confident I was that one of them would escort me home.

A branch snapped ahead of me. My heart skipped a beat. I froze, my eyes glued to the misty path. A tree's bark cracked nearby as something pressed against its trunk. The growl of a creature carried on a gust of wind.

Through the fog, a dark shape lumbered directly toward me. It must've been three, maybe four, times my height. Its hooves thumped against dirt. Sprawling, wide palmate antlers stirred the pine needles, long tendrils of pondweed draped from each jagged edge of its frame. It was first a blur of greens and browns and reds before it coalesced into shape of a massive ungulate. Moss coated

its fur, ferns sprouting from its sides and vines weaving along its legs. Russet shelves of fungi clung to ribs that protruded from decomposing skin.

I forgot how to breathe. My feet refused to carry me away from what must've been my death sentence.

Empty eye sockets gaped in its decaying skull. Surely death had meant to take the monstrosity long ago. It grunted through a closed muzzle, long fangs jutting out from its jawline. The closer it came, the further I was cast into its shadow. One stomp from a hoof, one stab from an antler, and I would be dead.

Its head dipped toward me as it stepped closer and closer, until finally we were face-to-face. A heavy exhale billowed across my cheeks, smelling of rotting wood and wet earth.

I was petrified, locked in place, vision disturbed by dizzying black specks. Nervous shivering overwhelmed me. My jaw trembled. My eyes burned as I forced myself to stop blinking, too terrified that it would kill me the moment I closed them. Blood drained from my face, and my heart raced.

Startling warmth rushed through my arms, but I couldn't bear to look away from the monster's empty gaze. An unfamiliar burning sensation tore through my chest, over my shoulders, down to my hands.

The creature's nostrils flared. An unusual pale red glow illuminated its face. It huffed, breaking eye contact with me as it further lowered its head. A spongy, moss-covered snout bumped

against my arm. I swallowed, then gathered every bit of courage in me to follow its line of sight down to the arm it was inspecting.

Shock hit me. A light pulsed through my veins. I rotated my forearm, watching as the light followed the course of my veins, culminating in my palms, stinging my fingertips. The creature nudged my glowing hand. Soft particles of glittering magic illuminated its nose, floating in the air. It snorted, and I could only imagine it was meant to be a sneeze.

The creature lifted its head, taking a few steps back before turning toward the path ahead and trudging away. I remained frozen in place, desperately willing it to walk in a direction that *wasn't* toward my home. Adrenaline locked my knees. By the time its silhouette slipped into the fog, I remembered how to breathe.

The further it went, the more my fear settled. As the tension eased in my body, the light slowly faded from my veins. I pressed my thumb against my hot skin, wincing as sharp pain flared in my arms. I'd never seen such an intense activation of magic in my body; shapeshifting had never been easy for me. It had taken me years to summon enough magic to shift a substance. Fabric, sand, and metal were the only materials I could—just barely—change, and only with intense focus on the item.

Yet, without any concentration, new light had raged through me in response to my fear. I couldn't remember the last time I'd been so afraid of something. I squinted at the activation of magic, unsure of what to think.

The walking corpse stopped, yanking my attention away. My heart dropped. Its head cranked around to leer at me. I silently begged the thing to break eye contact—if that was even the right description for an empty stare from holes in a skull. I stepped forward to see if it would react to movement. It resumed its plod ahead. I paused. The monster glanced over its shoulder again, a low grunt resounding from ribs underneath sloughed flesh. It seemed like it was waiting for me.

So, I followed. Hesitantly, but I could swallow my fear. It hadn't attacked me, hadn't killed me, hadn't consumed me; it had simply scared the fuck out of me. I kept a close eye on the red-painted trees as I followed behind it. We seemed to be heading in the same direction. In all honesty, my trek home was made easier by its trampling of the overgrown plants I would've struggled through.

About halfway through our journey, it took a sudden turn past a marked trunk. I slowed to a halt as it stepped off my route. I wasn't sure why I was a bit disappointed—though I didn't know how I felt about it coming all the way home with me, somehow its company had begun to make me feel *better*. Whatever this thing was, the rest of the woods was scared of it. But it was docile toward me, and I appreciated any semblance of life—was it alive?— showing me the way home amongst the rest of the forest's unsettling quiet.

The creature twisted its head to stare at me again. I drew

in a deep breath. Was it stupid to follow the thing off of the trail? Probably, but I was great at ignoring safety concerns when curiosity was involved. I kept trailing behind, hovering at a careful distance.

We only walked for a few minutes before it slowed once more. I shielded my eyes from the sunlight filtering in through the thick canopy. The creature barely tilted its head toward a gateway between two towering cedars, welcoming me forward. Holding my breath, I hid my shaking hands behind my back as I neared its flank. It watched my every movement.

I paused again; I did *not* like the idea of the thing following *me*. It looked back ahead, stomping a hoof into the ground and scraping up a bed of moss. Lifting my chin, I forced away my doubt while stepping through the two cedars.

In a forest clearing, bright viridian grass had grown in a patch of sun, circling around a mess of mossy rocks. A jolt of energy surged through me as realization struck. I ran forward, falling on my knees to inspect the stones. Though I couldn't decipher the exact age of the crumbled structure, the amount of lichen spread across its surface was similar to that of other wartime artifacts I'd found in the woods. Moss outlined the shape of a symbol carved on a trio of stones. I scraped some of it away with my thumb, revealing the image of a sword that I knew I'd seen before, but couldn't remember where.

Beside the blade was a runic inscription. The same runic in the soldier's documentation—the runic that the other arch was

supposed to have, but didn't.

The creature had led me to the true arch.